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## Debt Ceiling Looms Beyond Spending Fight

Mixed signals hint at rumblings beneath the GOP surface

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Conservatives are privately debating how much space to give House leaders to follow through on promises made at their Williamsburg, Va., retreat in January, with a wait-and-see approach embraced by key veterans and a smaller movement of mostly newer lawmakers wanting to push leadership harder.

The divide is behind the mixed signals in the past week as Republicans provided a surprisingly unified vote on the continuing resolution followed quickly by bold threats by conservatives to bring down rule votes.

The debate has big implications for how Republicans will approach future spending showdowns such as the next debt ceiling increase and shows there are rumblings beneath the surface during a period of relative tranquility for the GOP conference.

A working group of five influential conservatives that includes Reps. [Paul D. Ryan](#) of Wisconsin, [Tom Price](#) of Georgia, [Jim Jordan](#) of Ohio, [Jeb Hensarling](#) of Texas and Republican Study Committee Chairman [Steve Scalise](#) of Louisiana is leading the wait-and-see school of thought, and its members helped whip the recent short-term debt ceiling increase.

Indeed, the March 6 RSC meeting turned into something of a rally for unity on the CR vote, according to lawmakers and aides present. In the resulting vote, only 14 Republicans voted against the bill — surprising because Republicans were forsaking an opportunity to leverage further spending cuts or policy priorities.

In contrast, the rule vote earlier that day saw 16 GOP defections, a shockingly high number for what are normally party-line rule votes.

That tally was somewhat inflated: Some members planned to switch their votes if the rule was actually in jeopardy. Others, such as a trio of Georgia Republicans — Reps. [Jack Kingston](#), [Phil Gingrey](#) and [Paul Broun](#) — may have been eyeing the effect of the vote on a Senate GOP primary in their home state.

Nevertheless, on the heels of a nine-vote defection on the Violence Against Women Act rule, the rebels showed real aggravation over leadership's unwillingness to use the CR as a vehicle to defund "Obamacare."

Leading the charge against the rule on the House floor was Rep. [Matt Salmon](#), who has since vowed to try to bring down other rule votes if legislation will break the "Hastert rule" or increase spending without offsetting cuts.

The Arizona Republican is in his second stint in Congress; in his first he helped bring down then-Speaker Newt Gingrich, participating in a failed coup plot and then announcing on CNN after the 1998 elections that he carried the six votes necessary to deny Gingrich the speaker's gavel.

He first floated his "Salmon rule" plan at a Club for Growth conference in Palm Beach, Fla., this past weekend. Buzz from the event and other discussions has already led to something of a movement around Salmon as an emerging leader of the hard right.

"You've got a lot of outside groups who have been looking for the second coming of [Mike Pence](#), [or] [Jim DeMint](#), and right now he's looking like the guy who — whether he wants it to be it or not — he's probably going to be the guy the conservative outside groups rally to," said Erick Erickson, the radio host, television pundit and managing editor of RedState.com who keeps close tabs on the GOP conference.

While the two camps disagree, they're not fundamentally at odds. Even the group urging caution is watching Speaker [John A. Boehner](#), R-Ohio, with some trepidation.



Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call File Photo

Scalise is a member of a group of conservatives that is leading the wait-and-see school of thought, and its members helped whip the recent short-term debt ceiling increase.

"I don't think we're necessarily in different camps, so to speak, I just think we have different ideas on how to get there. I'm a little bit more impatient," Salmon said.

In a surprising twist, some in the wait-and-see school have urged the more aggressive Republicans to tone it down by arguing that giving Boehner space one last time is providing rope to hang himself with — the argument being that the next debt ceiling fight will convincingly demonstrate that Boehner is not up for the task when he inevitably caves.

While the budget fight will dominate the next several weeks, the debt ceiling, which will need to be increased by May 19, looms as a more significant and perilous battle.

But it is still not clear exactly what conservatives will want from the next increase, as they are just beginning to discuss the issue.

Rep. [John Fleming](#), R-La., who voted against the CR rule but for the CR, said he won't be able to vote for a debt ceiling increase unless it is accompanied by a "balanced budget that is verifiable such as, for instance, the Ryan budget."

Given President Barack Obama's past positions and unlikeliness to agree to enacting a budget like that, Fleming predicted he will not be able to vote for the increase.

Salmon said he would like to see Boehner's original demand of dollar-for-dollar cuts equal or greater to the amount of the debt ceiling being increased but that he was open to significant entitlement reforms instead.

Erickson said in Williamsburg the working group was "told that they would get the debt ceiling to May or June and they would re-have this fight. And I don't see that they're going to extract any meaningful concessions on the debt ceiling fight again, at which point they'll look very foolish."

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